

Title: First Mail Delivery in Fairbury Area

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The story about the first mail route that served the Fairbury area is a very interesting one. The first mail carrier in this area was George Washington Rice (1834-1926). There are at least two data sources for how these first mail routes were operated.

The first historical reference source for the first mail routes was a 1915 four-page paper titled ***Old Time Postal Distribution in Illinois*** written by Dr. John Ryan (1860-1948). Dr. Ryan was a Methodist minister in Central Illinois for more than 60 years. He was a minister in Pontiac and was the Chaplain of the Boys Reformatory for 20 years. Reverend Ryan was very interested in local history and served as the President of the Livingston County Historical Society. A copy of Dr. Ryan's paper can be viewed or downloaded from <https://tinyurl.com/5cv4u9c7>.

A copy of Dr. Ryan's paper about early postal distribution was found by accident in early 2024 when the archives of the Livingston County Historical Society were being inventoried. For his paper, Dr. Ryan apparently interviewed Mr. G. W. Rice who was the first mail carrier and who was living in Pontiac in 1915.

Further investigation found that the full name of G. W. Rice was George Washington Rice (1834-1926). The Daily Leader obituary for Mr. Rice noted that he was Pontiac's first mail carrier and gave some details of his mail route. Mr. Rice was also a veteran of the Civil War and was a long-time Pontiac merchant including operating a furniture factory.

In the 1830s, Mr. W. K. Brown settled on Mud Creek in Esmen Township. While still living in Livingston County, Mr. Brown took charge of several different mail routes. He later moved to Ottawa in 1848.

In 1839, George Rice was 15 years old. He attended school, but was able to work part-time on a mail route for Mr. Brown. George eventually worked as a mail carrier on each of the five mail routes that Mr. Brown was in charge of. The mail carriers usually rode on horseback to complete their deliveries.

The Ottawa to Bloomington mail route served Livingston County. On every Friday morning, George left Ottawa on his mail route. He took a ferry to cross the Illinois River and his first stop was the Post Office at Covell Creek ran by Mr. Richardson. The next stop was at the home of Mr. Elmer Baldwin. George then proceeded to the home of Norton Mackey on Otter Creek. George's next stop before taking dinner was the home of Isaac Painter in east Streator.

After dinner was completed, George rode his horse the nine miles from Streator to New Michigan. A Mr. Richards kept that postal office. New Michigan is now a ghost town southeast of Streator. It had a post office from 1849 until 1872.

George next went to a home in Sunbury Township. This office was kept at different times by W. K. Brown, John Bradley, and E. G. Rice. Mr. E. G. Rice was the father of George Rice, so George could spend the night at his parent's house on Friday night.

George's mail route resumed Saturday morning when he brought the mail to Pontiac to the office in the store of Willett Gray and Samuel Ladd.

George then traveled four miles southeast of Pontiac to the home of Daniel Rockwoods, where dinner was secured. The next stop was for the small village of Avoca in the McDowell settlement. Initially, the office was kept by a Mr. Wilson on the South Fork of the Vermilion River. Because flooding of the river prevented the mail carrier from being able to cross the river, the location was changed to the McDowell's home. The village of Avoca had a post office from 1838 until 1872.

The last segment of the route for Saturday was to travel from Avoca to Indian Grove Township. Fairbury was not founded until 1857, so George was delivering mail before the village of Fairbury existed. George spent the night at the Indian Grove postal stop. Indian Grove had a post office from 1846 until 1859.

On Sunday morning, George rode his horse the 15 miles from Indian Grove to Lexington. In that era, George saw no human inhabitants on this portion of his route. The Lexington office was kept by a Mr. Flesher and George usually arrived around noon. A church was nearby and Sunday services were usually over by noon. Church goers would linger after church until the mail carrier arrived so they could get their mail.

George then made a stop at Money Creek and finally his last stop was Bloomington. George started his return trip to Ottawa from Bloomington on Monday morning. He arrived back at Ottawa on Tuesday night.

George was paid \$8 a month as a postal carrier. The salary of \$8 per month in 1850 would be equivalent to about \$300 in today's dollars.

The mail route was very challenging to the mail carrier in the wintertime. Many times George had to cross the Illinois River at Ottawa when the ice was thick enough to prevent the ferry from operating, but not thick enough for a person to walk on. When this happened, George would alternate putting two wood planks in front of him to walk on with his mail sack to cross the thin ice.

The only compensation for traveling in the bad weather was traveling when the weather was nice. Dr. Ryan noted the mail carrier got to enjoy the gorgeous color of the prairies with the wild free life of bird and beast, full rivers pressing their wooded shores, and variegated fields of green and gold blending with the purple sky line.